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Conference Abstract

Building and Sustaining Authoritative Resources for the Community: Who Is Responsible?

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Abstract

Natural history collections are inherently interdisciplinary, and thus rely on expertise from diverse domains such as taxonomy, geography, and geologic stratigraphy. In an effort to benefit from such expertise, collection management systems may attempt to rely on broader community resources such as Global Names Architecture, Global Administrative Areas (GADM), and the International Chronostratigraphic Chart, which offer access to authoritative information. These resources may not be purpose-built for the collections community and so require manipulation or even “digitization” before they can be used. The International Chronostratigraphic Chart is a lovely visual, but it must be translated to a table to be useful for integration with natural history data. These resources also often have a fragile existence, perhaps entirely dependent upon a single institution or person. Issues identified in GADM by the user community are not resolved quickly because the single developer does not have time dedicated to enhancing the data. It may be difficult to determine if a resource is well funded and sustainably maintained—few of them openly advertise their paid contributors or funding mechanisms. Some of these resources may not even be aware of the natural history collections community’s needs and might be able to supply more useable versions if they were. These are all risks that restrict collections management systems and other technical infrastructure from effectively and predictably being able to use such open-source resources. Critically, we can’t tell when a resource qualifies as “in use by the broader community” and therefore “necessary.” What happens, then, when such a resource is orphaned, gets an update, or completely

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disappears? The natural history collections community would benefit from acknowledging and supporting these types of resources. If we want to have useful tools for the whole community, we need to figure out how to sustain them. This means paying people with appropriate skills and ensuring that the necessary infrastructure is (and remains) available. This presentation will look at several external authorities used by the collaborative collection management solution Arctos and start a discussion about how sharing the maintenance burden of such resources might make them more sustainable and responsive to the needs of the collection community.

Keywords

Arctos, authority, natural history collection, sustainability

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.